

Sermon for the 2nd Sunday after Christmas
Trinity Church, January 4, 2009

Herod was frightened, and when Herod was frightened, all Jerusalem was frightened along with him. There was nothing unusual about that. Herod was always afraid. Everything he did, he did out of fear. Herod's fear is like the blizzard wind. The wind itself can't be seen but its effects produce a confusion all across the landscape. Herod is called a king, but he is really a puppet of Rome, so he is afraid of the Romans. They can get rid of him in an instant. He fears his people, so his only course of action is to oppress them cruelly. He lives in fear. He has power, but he can only use it in treacherous, futile and pathetic attempts to save his own life. In this he is the very model of every bully who has ever lived. It is also a clear and dramatic example of the chaos people can create when fear rules their lives.

The story captures our imagination. It has all the ingredients of high drama. Strange and remarkable figures appear in Jerusalem, a noble caravan of scholars, astrologers who have seen a star and divined its meaning. We don't know how many of them there were, Matthew doesn't say. In our tradition there were three and we have even given them names. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition there are twelve of them. How many there were doesn't really matter, but it was their question that sets the plot in motion. Wiser than a lot of men, they stopped to ask for directions. "Where can we find the King of the Jews who is newly born, because we have seen his rising star, and we have come to worship him."

So Herod is more frightened than ever, and all of Jerusalem is shaken. He consults with the religious authorities and they tell him that the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem. Herod is frightened, but he is also cunning. He has to be. So he invites these noble and scholarly men to visit him secretly. He tells them that the place they should look for the child in Bethlehem and when they had found him, they should come back and let him know where this holy child would be found so that he, too -- he Herod the king -- could go and worship him also. You can imagine that oily voice and modestly downcast eyes, the very model of humility and religious piety.

But the wise men are wise men. They were not taken in by Herod's pious charade. They went to Bethlehem, performed their acts of worship at the manger throne, left their precious and highly symbolic gifts and then disappeared as mysteriously as they had come. And Herod is left alone with his fear.

It's a wonderful story. It has all of the elements of high drama: mystery, intrigue,

richness and color, strange and precious things, dark and brooding evil -- the mood that Giancarlo Menotti captured for our delight in *Ahmal and the Night Visitors*. It is a part of the whole rich tapestry of Christmas.

But to stop there is to miss the whole point of the story. Not only is it a great drama: it is also a profound moral lesson, a lesson we are inclined to miss if we put it away with the Christmas decorations.

The Christmas stories are really an extended parable. They speak to what lies buried in the human soul. What is powerfully at work in this Christmas story is the confrontation of two moral and spiritual forces that affect every human life, that determine our actions and the attitudes that shape the direction of our lives. They are the fundamental human motivations that finally influence the course of history itself. They are hope and fear, so that Christmas is where hope contends with fear.

Herod is fear. Everything he does is a product of his fear. The pilgrimage of the Magi, the Sages, the wise men is driven by a transcendent hope. In this moral and spiritual parable the wise men are Hope. They represent the hope of all the world; so that there in Jerusalem, hope confronted, contended with, and ultimately conquered fear. Christmas is where hope contends with fear.

We live at a moment when fear dominates the landscape. It comes in all forms and dimensions. There is the fear of a failing economy, that comes to sharp focus when people go hungry, or see the threat of hunger; when they lose a home, or see the very real possibility of that happening. There is the constant abrasion of war that seems never-ending and that strikes homes and communities with anxiety and too many homes with stark grief, not only in America, but all over the world. The agenda of problems is all too familiar to all of us. And for us, the privileged, it is revealing for us to examine how much of our consciousness is devoted to our fears and our efforts to shore up our defenses against the known or unknown threat.

We are inclined to think of hope as something passive. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Hope is what lies at the root of action, and hope is what keeps us soldiering on in the face of discouragement. Most of you know that last Sunday June and I played hookey from Trinity Church. The time schedule for the day gave me the chance to listen to one of those early morning political discussion programs. The panelists, news people who represented all shades of editorial opinion, were reviewing the agenda of enormous problems that would face a new presidential administration on January 20.

But there was a surprise. There crept into the conversation something that I had already begun to sense in the mood of our country -- the idea that out of the

darkness of our time, we may be witnessing the dawn of something new and exciting. From left and right there began to sound a note of hope. Political analysts who a few months ago were in each others' faces, showed a surprising level of agreement. Someone said that it is time for a "reset of our values" and the rest of the panel latched on to the term. Most of us know that on most of our complicated machines there is a little red button somewhere that is labeled "reset" and that when things get messed up we can press the Reset and start over from scratch. It was the excitement of those men and women, cynics by profession, talking about the possibilities for the reassessment and resetting of the American agenda, that for me was more than a glimmer of hope. It was a bright ray.

We might imagine what that would be like. In many ways, the new agenda would amount to a recovery of the old. It would involve a new idea of community.